

Linda Melconian

Assistant Counsel and Legislative Assistant, Speaker Thomas P. (Tip) O'Neill of Massachusetts

**Oral History Interview
Final Edited Transcript**

June 7, 2018

Office of the Historian
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C.

“One time, we were talking to other female Members and maybe there were three or four of us—two staff people and one or two Members. Male Members would come over to us and say, ‘Oh, what are you girls cooking up? Are you conspiring against us?’ . . . Three or more women . . . on the floor congregating—chatting—would cause concern among the male Members. Were we conspiring against them? What I found so fascinating about this experience is that years later, when I served in the Massachusetts senate [during] my freshman year, I was talking to two other female members. I had male state senators come up to us and say, ‘Are you three conspiring against us?’ I thought, ‘I can’t believe this. It’s happening here in Massachusetts years later—the same thing that happened on the House Floor in Washington.’”

Linda Melconian
June 7, 2018

Table of Contents

Interview Abstract	i
Interviewee Biography	ii
Editing Practices	iii
Citation Information	iii
Interviewer Biography	iv
Interview One	1
Notes	55

Abstract

Linda Melconian was a recent college graduate when Congressman Thomas P. (Tip) O'Neill of Massachusetts hired her in 1971. During the next decade, she worked closely with O'Neill as he moved up the leadership ladder from Majority Whip, to Majority Leader, and, finally, to Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives. As one of the first women to hold floor privileges in all three House leadership offices, Melconian offers a unique perspective on floor proceedings, leadership initiatives, and the role of women staff members in the House.

In this oral history, Melconian recalls her path from her hometown of Springfield, Massachusetts, to Capitol Hill, where she started as a legislative assistant working on the House Floor for Majority Whip O'Neill. She outlines the structure of the Democratic whip operation, including the role of congressional staff in counting votes and crafting and conveying the message of leadership. She recounts her observations in O'Neill's office during the Watergate investigation, offering a first-hand account of the way the crisis unfolded on the House Floor.

Melconian also discusses her roles as a speechwriter, researcher, and assistant counsel for O'Neill during his terms as Majority Leader and Speaker. Reflecting on Speaker O'Neill's efforts to shape the Democratic Party's agenda during the 1970s, she provides insight into his legislative priorities, leadership style, and his relationship with President Jimmy Carter. She highlights O'Neill's focus on ethics reform and his foreign policy efforts, from his involvement in the Camp David Accords to his interest in finding a peaceful solution to the political violence in Northern Ireland. She also chronicles her experience on a congressional delegation to Europe in April 1979, where she joined Speaker O'Neill as he visited the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland.

Biography

In 1971, Linda Melconian began her career on Capitol Hill working for Congressman Thomas P. (Tip) O'Neill of Massachusetts. Over the next 10 years, she worked as a legislative assistant and assistant counsel as O'Neill served as Majority Whip, Majority Leader, and Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives. In doing so, she became one of the first women to hold floor privileges in all three House leadership offices and gained valuable political experience that formed the foundation of her own political career.

Linda Melconian was born in Springfield, Massachusetts, the daughter of Virginia Melconian, a homemaker, and George Melconian, a line-type machinist for the local newspapers. She attended Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley, Massachusetts, where she secured an internship on Capitol Hill with Massachusetts Representative Edward Boland. She also worked as an intern for Senator Edmund Muskie of Maine before graduating from college in 1970.

As part of then-Majority Whip O'Neill's staff, Melconian learned the workings of the institution from the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives. She represented Whip O'Neill on the House Floor and was educated in the finer points of legislating through her interactions with Members of Congress. She participated in vote-counting and the behind-the-scenes dialogue that shaped important legislation.

When O'Neill became Majority Leader in 1973, Melconian added speechwriting and research to her duties on the House Floor. She also worked to build connections between the Speaker and the Democratic Caucus in anticipation of O'Neill's future campaign for Speaker by planning district visits and serving as a liaison between Members and the Speaker on legislative matters.

During O'Neill's Speakership, Melconian was involved in the Speaker's effort to implement ethics guidelines and revise the seniority system and the committee selection process. She also assisted the Speaker in his forays into U.S. foreign policy, providing information and accompanying him during meetings with visiting dignitaries in Washington, DC, and abroad.

After completing law school at George Mason University, Melconian served as assistant counsel to Speaker O'Neill before returning to Springfield to run for a vacant seat in the Massachusetts state senate in 1981. The following year she won election to the first of 11 terms in the Massachusetts legislature, rising to become the first woman to hold the title of majority leader in the state senate. She resides in Springfield and teaches courses in government and politics at Suffolk University in Boston.

Editing Practices

In preparing interview transcripts for publication, the editors sought to balance several priorities:

- As a primary rule, the editors aimed for fidelity to the spoken word and the conversational style in accord with generally accepted oral history practices.
- The editors made minor editorial changes to the transcripts in instances where they believed such changes would make interviews more accessible to readers. For instance, excessive false starts and filler words were removed when they did not materially affect the meaning of the ideas expressed by the interviewee.
- In accord with standard oral history practices, interviewees were allowed to review their transcripts, although they were encouraged to avoid making substantial editorial revisions and deletions that would change the conversational style of the transcripts or the ideas expressed therein.
- The editors welcomed additional notes, comments, or written observations that the interviewees wished to insert into the record and noted any substantial changes or redactions to the transcript.
- Copy-editing of the transcripts was based on the standards set forth in *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

The first reference to a Member of Congress (House or Senate) is underlined in the oral history transcript. For more information about individuals who served in the House or Senate, please refer to the online *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov> and the “People Search” section of the History, Art & Archives website, <http://history.house.gov>.

For more information about the U.S. House of Representatives oral history program contact the Office of House Historian at (202) 226-1300, or via email at history@mail.house.gov.

Citation Information

When citing this oral history interview, please use the format below:

“Linda Melconian Oral History Interview,” Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives (7 June 2018).

Interviewer Biography

Michael J. Murphy is a Historical Publications Specialist in the Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives. He earned his Ph.D. in U.S. history from Stony Brook University in Stony Brook, New York, in 2013. Before joining the Office of the Historian, he was Visiting Associate Professor at the Joseph S. Murphy Institute for Worker Education and Labor Studies at the City University of New York.

— LINDA MELCONIAN —
A CENTURY OF WOMEN IN CONGRESS

MURPHY: This is Mike Murphy in the House Recording Studio on June 7th, 2018. Today, I'm happy to speak with Linda Melconian, a former staff member for Speaker Thomas P. [Philip] (Tip) O'Neill, who went on to a long career as a Massachusetts state senator, where she became the first woman to serve as a majority leader of that body. Thank you for joining us for this interview that will be part of the Office of the Historian's women in Congress oral history project, *A Century of Women in Congress*.

MELCONIAN: Well, thank you, Mike, for including me in this oral history project, *A Century of Women in Congress*. It's an honor and a privilege to participate, just as it was an honor and a privilege to work here in the [U.S.] House of Representatives, which is the greatest elective body in the history of the world. In our national system of government, the House of Representatives is the only place where you have to be elected to serve. You can be appointed President. You can be appointed Vice President. You can be appointed to the Senate. But you have to be elected to get here. And this is really the People's House. As Alexander Hamilton said, "It's here, sir, the people govern." So to work in this institution, this House of Representatives, the People's House, as a professional staff person for 10 years with Speaker Tip O'Neill in the Majority Whip's Office, the Leader's Office, and the Speaker's Office, was indeed an honor and a privilege. It was the most wonderful experience of my whole life.

MURPHY: Great. I'm happy that you're here to talk to us about this really interesting period in the history of this institution—the 1970s—when you were working

for Speaker O'Neill. But I wanted to start with your story before you came to Washington, DC. Where did you grow up?

MELCONIAN: I grew up in Springfield, Massachusetts. I was an only child. My mother kept telling me that I was unlimited—I was “Linda Jean Melconian, Unlimited.” I used to repeat it so many times that I actually {laughter} began to believe it. She was not interested in politics, but she was a brilliant student in high school. Unfortunately, she grew up during the Depression, so she wasn't able to go to college. But she was a brilliant writer, and I think—I know I got my writing skills from her. My father was a hardworking linotype machinist at the Springfield newspapers. He never finished high school. He eventually got his general high school equivalency. But he was always interested in politics.

I graduated from Springfield Public Schools and went on to Mount Holyoke College [in South Hadley, Massachusetts]. I think the seeds of politics and public service were planted early for me. It probably began in 1960, when [John Fitzgerald] Kennedy was running for President. The last day before the election—the Monday before the election—he made a swing through New England, and he stopped in Springfield to give a speech. My father took me out of school and with a press pass that he had, I got real close and I got to shake his hand. And 48 hours later, he was the President of the United States. I didn't want to wash that hand. I kept looking at that hand for a whole week. That hand touched the President of the United States. It meant something. I was a little kid then, but it meant something.

Then in 1964, my parents brought me to Washington for the first time and it was during the Senate consideration of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. I remember going over to the Senate and sitting in the Senate gallery with my parents and watching one person, a Southern Senator—I think it was [James] Strom Thurmond—read from the phone book. I said, “What's this all about?”

Where are all the rest of the Senators? What's going on? What's this got to do with civil rights?" Then we went over to the House and I saw the House. Of course, Speaker [John William] McCormack was the Speaker then, and he was from Massachusetts, so that meant something to us. Again, there was somebody reading in an empty chamber and I said, "This isn't what I learned about in school. What's this all about?" Well, I later realized that I had witnessed a filibuster in the Senate and had witnessed special orders in the House Chamber. So that intrigued me. I said, "I've got to learn more about this. What's really going on down here? It's not what I'm learning in the schoolbooks."

In '68, our Congressman, [Edward Patrick] Eddie Boland, ran for re-election. He had a primary opponent who was the mayor of the city of Springfield. That year, Defense Secretary [Robert S.] McNamara decided to make defense cuts across the country. He included the Springfield Armory, which was the oldest armory in the United States. George Washington actually visited Springfield as President to commission the Springfield Armory, and it was very active during the Vietnam War. Naturally, Springfield blamed the incumbent Congressman, and the mayor ran against him. It was a feisty campaign—a hard fought primary.

So Eddie Boland called my father because they had worked together in the garage at the newspaper. They knew each other when Eddie Boland was going to school. He said, "Your daughter—could she be a 'Boland girl'? I'd like to have her come down and be a 'Boland girl.'" Well, what did that mean? Department stores were open until 9:00 in the evenings on Thursday night, so we would go down there in front of Forbes & Wallace and Steiger's, the two big Springfield department stores—when we had department stores downtown, not in malls. I would wear a hat and a banner across my chest,

and I'd hold a placard and we'd walk around in circles. A number of women—and men, but mostly females, young women, young girls—would walk and go up to everybody saying, “Vote for Boland.” It was busy. There was a lot of activity going on. That was my introduction to organizational politics, rallies, demonstrations—visibility, as we call it today, in organizational politics. It was kind of intriguing.

When I was at Mount Holyoke, we did a poll in 1970, in Holyoke, Massachusetts. At the time, the [Massachusetts state] senate president was running for governor, and he was from Holyoke. His campaign had commissioned the political science department of Mount Holyoke to do this poll. So we did this poll, and that introduced me to door-to-door canvassing and campaigning. All this was very intriguing to me, so I think the seeds were there, but they really culminated when I went to Mount Holyoke College.

Mount Holyoke was on the map in Washington, DC. We had a legendary professor at Mount Holyoke named [Victoria] Vicky Schuck, who was there from 1949 until 1977, when she retired. She put Mount Holyoke on the map in Washington. What she did was, she took bright, talented young women in college and placed them in political positions—political offices here in Washington that had previously been reserved only for males. From 1949 to the time when I got there, in the late '60s, early '70s, Mount Holyoke was known in Washington. She had built a network and a cadre of women who had been interns, and had now graduated and were working in professional staff positions all over Washington—the administration, with government relations offices, think tanks, and on Capitol Hill. If you were in Washington, you wanted a Mount Holyoke intern. You had a bright, talented young woman who understood loyalty, observed confidences, could write well, was extremely capable. And Mount Holyoke women were all over

the map. So Vicky Schuck was kind of a change agent—a female change agent—and Mount Holyoke was there. Sophomore year, I said, “Oh, I think I want to intern in Washington. This sounds exciting.” And I did. I came down here.

I ended up with two internships here. The first was with Senator [Edmund Sixtus] Ed Muskie on the Senate side. That’s where I learned about the Senate as an institution. I responded to constituent letters on issues, so I learned about what the issues were. I went and watched the floor debates, so I learned about floor process and procedure and the Senate as a deliberative body. I was working with another Mount Holyoke alumna, Jane Fenderson. She eventually ended up being the scheduler and top assistant to Rosalynn Carter, the First Lady.

Then my next internship was with Eddie Boland, who was my Congressman. And there I responded to and wrote constituent letters on issues, did casework, really learned the operations of a congressional office. I would go and watch the House Floor debate. I did extension of remarks. I gave people tours of the Capitol—we would stand outside the House, outside on the steps there, with pictures. Years later, when I ran for the state senate, people would come up to me and say, “Oh, I remember you, Linda. You were that young girl that took us around. You were on an internship in Washington and took a picture with us.” And sometimes they showed me the picture. Several of them gave me the picture. I didn’t remember who they were, but they remembered me. So that was fascinating, and that was exciting. And I fell in love with the legislative process. And I loved the House—again, because the House was really the People’s House, and you had to be elected to serve there.

I grew up, obviously, in the '60s, which was a very tumultuous period in our history. You had protests against the Vietnam War. You had the women's movement. You had student protests in college wanting more power. I can remember at Mount Holyoke, one year I was going to class in the morning, and people said, "Don't bother. The African American Society of the Five Colleges in our area have taken over all the buildings here, and everything has been cancelled." So I saw that. What were these protests about? A war that was wrong, in which we shouldn't be involved, from which we should get out. The civil rights movement, women's equality, all of those things. In other words, we were trying to break down the barriers. The protests were about breaking down barriers that prevented women and minorities from opportunities, from the American dream, from being able to realize their potential.

After the internship, I saw that working in Washington was where I wanted to be, because I could be a change agent. I could make a difference—even on a staff level—to break down these barriers. Because I had learned in college about the two customs or ethos that came from the American Revolution: the idea of equality of opportunity from our Declaration of Independence—all men are created equal. Of course, they didn't include women then. And life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, which meant the right to control your own destiny, individual liberty. I saw that equality of opportunity meant an equal playing field, and the right to be whatever you wanted to be and to go as far as you wanted—not allowing anyone to prevent you from being the best that you could be. I saw that as opportunity and liberty, and I wanted to break down whatever barriers prevented any classes of our society from having that opportunity. I felt since I had crossed that threshold of opportunity—given my experience, my exposures as an intern, my Mount

Holyoke education—that I had an obligation, a responsibility, a duty, to make sure that others were able to cross that threshold too.

Those were the reasons why I came to Washington. I didn't realize until later—when I started working for Tip O'Neill—that he basically believed in the same philosophy. He called it “opportunity and achievement.”

Opportunity: equal playing field. Achievement: because of our capitalist system. And he described it as “work and wages”—the right to have a job, the ability to work, and the ability through that work to earn a decent wage.

Work and wages to support your family.

MURPHY: So you had these formative experiences throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. How did you try to turn that into a career? How did you make your way to paid work here in Washington, DC?

MELCONIAN: Well, as I said, I had this internship program. I came down after I graduated and Ed Muskie was running for President at the time. So I joined the campaign as a paid staffer—minimal pay, but I was a paid staffer. While I was there, I found out, again through my Mount Holyoke connections, that there was a woman, a Mount Holyoke graduate, Judith Kurland—who was working in the office of the newly-elected Whip Tip O'Neill. She also worked the Rules Committee for Tip O'Neill. She was about to take a leave of absence to go to Israel to study over there and maybe eventually come back to work for O'Neill. So they were looking for someone who was capable. As I said, through my Mount Holyoke connections, I found out that there was this opening. Knowing that Eddie Boland and Tip O'Neill were very close, I seized this opportunity. Tip and Eddie were roommates down here, they had served in the Massachusetts legislature together, and they were called “the Odd Couple” back home—very different from each other. But they were roommates for the 30-odd years that they served in the Congress.

So I called Eddie Boland, and I said, “What’s going on in O’Neill’s office? I hear there’s an opening.” I said, “I think I’m qualified. What do you think?” He said, “Oh, absolutely. Let me check into it.” So he called the administrative assistant, Leo Diehl, and said, “I have a great woman who has interned with me. I think you ought to interview her.” So I got the interview. Leo Diehl had just come down from Massachusetts—he was a former state rep in Massachusetts and a former commissioner of the department of revenue, and a lifelong friend of Tip O’Neill’s. They had served in the legislature together as well—the Massachusetts legislature. Tip O’Neill and his wife Millie wanted Leo down here when he was entering leadership to run the office. So he was running the office, and I’m the only person he ever hired in that office. He and I just hit it off—it was chemistry. Years later, after my father passed away, he became like an adopted father and uncle to me, and we had a lifelong friendship for almost 40 years until he passed away. But anyway, Leo and I hit it off terrifically, and he decided, “This is the person I want to hire.” I didn’t know it at the time—until later when I was hired—that I was in competition against men. There were other men who applied. I was the only female who applied. The Mount Holyoke connection obviously helped me, and the fact that Leo and I got along so well.

Leo described what my responsibilities would be. I would be the “eyes and ears” of the Speaker on the floor—of the Whip. I will continue to probably call him Speaker, because that’s what I always call him, Mike, but he was Whip then. I would work on Rules Committee, prepare speeches, remarks, do the research, work with the Whip organization. So I was hired. I started working on the Rules Committee, the Whip organization, being the “eyes and ears” on the floor, and of course, we had the whole Vietnam resolution that came up during that period. Those were the kinds of things I worked on.

MURPHY: I'm interested in the workings of that office and also how you began working in DC. You said you competed against men for this job. Was it a welcoming environment for a woman on that staff when you started?

MELCONIAN: In the office, yes, because in our Whip office, it was very small. There was Leo [Diehl], two other women, and me, and [O'Neill], and then there was the congressional office. Everything was new, so it was a transitional period for everybody in that office. What were the workings of the Whip Office? How did we adjust to this? Tip O'Neill had been a member of Congress for so many years. This was the first time he was in leadership, so it was a transition. And our office was in the Capitol. Yes, I was welcomed on the staff, no question about that. Leo had every bit of confidence in me. He loved working with me. Tip O'Neill had known me somewhat from my internship with Eddie Boland, and he was pleased. I was a Mount Holyoke girl. My predecessor was a Mount Holyoke [graduate]. He knew I could do the job.

One of the things that I loved about Tip O'Neill in the 10 years I worked with him, he always encouraged young people to get involved, to do their best. He loved hiring young people. He always had interns. He would hire young people to be part of his staff. And he gave all the young people tremendous responsibility. He didn't discriminate between males and females—although I was the first woman that was hired anew in a professional position in the leadership office. Actually, I wasn't the first, because Judith Kurland preceded me for a few months, and so she was the first woman on professional staff in the Whip Office. Tip O'Neill believed in young people. He listened to young people. He listened to their advice. They felt privileged, I think, that he had that confidence and that faith in them, and they wanted to do the best they could for him.

So the staff was inviting. One of the things he said to me early on, he said, “Now, when you go on the floor, be careful. Don’t go into the cloakroom too much—the Democratic Cloakroom—because the men are going to feel uncomfortable with you in there. There aren’t any women in there.” There were no women Pages at the time. The Democratic Cloakroom was like a service operation. It had phone booths, and if Members were on the floor debating or listening to issues or bills that were on the floor, their staff could get ahold of them through the phone system. They would call them right off the floor. The Members wouldn’t have to leave the floor and go back to their office. This was, of course, way before we had cell phones or anything like that. In the back of the cloakroom there was a lounge area with a TV, and that’s where the men smoked their cigars, cigarettes. When we had late night sessions, male members sometimes fell asleep, took a little nap on the couches. They often shared their offensive, off-color jokes with one another in the lounge area.

As a woman staffer, I had three strikes against me, Mike. I was young—under 30. I was a woman. And I was single. So Tip O’Neill warned me. He said, “Stay out of the cloakroom unless you need to go in there. The boys don’t feel very comfortable with you. They’re not used to having a woman in there, so be careful.” And he also advised me, “Remember you are a staff person. A Member has a right to be on the floor, has a right to be in the cloakroom. You, as a staff person, it’s a privilege.” I had standing floor privileges—the same as a Member—which meant if the House went into executive session, I was a staff person who could attend and be there because I was part of the leadership. I thanked him and I always conducted myself accordingly. I always viewed it as a privilege, was very respectful to all the Members and staff people whom I ran across in the House and on the floor, and realized it was a privilege that could be taken away from me at any time.

MURPHY: How did you determine when it was necessary to go into the cloakroom or to speak with the Members on the floor about your work?

MELCONIAN: Well, it depended. For instance, with the Whip organization, one of the things we did was a Whip call, and that usually went through the cloakroom. I would have to go in there with the director of the cloakroom to give them the language of the Whip call and to send out the Whip message. Sometimes I would get a phone call. For instance, when my father passed away—this was the worst call I ever got on the floor and the worst experience I had while on the floor. Sometimes, I would order a phone call to Members from the Democratic Cloakroom. For example, I went to the cloakroom because there was the death—I think it was Congressman [William Fitts] Ryan of New York had passed away. The Whip Office gave that call to Members to inform them that someone had passed away and that there would be a memorial service—that Members would be going up as a delegation, when they would leave—all the logistics of how the House would honor that Member. Usually we closed the session when a sitting Member passed away or when a former Member passed away. We would close down the session—whatever bills were up that day—and the Whip Office would send out that notice. So I would go into the Democratic Cloakroom for that.

I would go into the cloakroom for Whip calls on legislation that was important. I'd go to check to see what was going on. If I was looking for a Member I needed to talk to—to find out how he was going to vote or if he had asked to speak to Tip O'Neill about something or needed to talk to me—I'd try to find him in the cloakroom if I didn't find him on the floor.

I went on the floor a lot as the “eyes and ears” to see what was going on. At first, it was to listen and learn—to really absorb the parliamentary procedures, the processes, what happened, who was close to whom, who

talked to whom. As Members saw me more and more on the floor, they would come over to me, and say, “I’d like to have Tip come out to my district.” This happened more frequently later on when we got into the Leader’s Office. The younger Members were much more comfortable talking to me. They were younger. They were comfortable with a woman. And they were a little more intimidated talking, maybe, to Speaker O’Neill. They didn’t know him. They hadn’t served in the House for very long. So they would ask me what I thought. And generally, I would give them advice, or I’d say, “I think you should ask him directly. Just go right up to him. You’ll be pleased with his answer.” If I thought it was something where I needed to maybe smooth things over before they talked to him—explain what their interests were because I knew maybe this particular individual was not one whom the Speaker was enamored about—then I would do that first. But let me—shall I explain the Whip organization?

MURPHY: Yes, that would be great.

MELCONIAN: It’s changed dramatically over the years, but in 1971, when Tip O’Neill became the Majority Whip—at that time, the Whip was appointed, not elected. He was appointed by the Majority Leader with the approval of the Speaker. That meant [Thomas] Hale Boggs [Sr.] appointed Tip O’Neill with Carl [Bert] Albert’s approval. And he was now on the rung of the ladder to become Speaker. Majority Whip, Leader, Speaker. Carl Albert and Hale Boggs had both been Whips, then Leader, and that’s usually the way it happened. The Majority Whip position was very prestigious and very important—and O’Neill was now the low person on the leadership ladder. Really, the Whip’s responsibility was to serve the Speaker and the Leader as a service operation, communicating between the leadership—the Leader and the Speaker—to the Members on legislation, on procedures, any rules

changes and votes that the leadership wanted. It was heads up to the Members on bills that were coming out of committees, going to the Rules Committee, maybe going to be on the floor. Were they controversial? Was there a Democratic position on these bills that the Members needed to know? Also the communication was a two-way street, communicating from the Members up to the leadership—the Leader and the Speaker—on what the concerns were of the Members.

Every Thursday morning at 9:15, we had a Whip meeting in the Whip Office. As Majority Whip, Tip O’Neill would chair it. The Speaker and the Leader would be there, the chairman of the Democratic Caucus, and we had 20 whips. The country was divided, I believe, into 19 zones. I think New York had two, so there were 20. Divided regionally—geographically—I think there were 10 to 25 Members in each zone and these were the leaders. They were elected by Members in their zones, and they were called zone whips an integral part of the Whip organization. I don’t believe we had deputy whips, chief deputy whips, and assistant whips then. That came later. But the Leader is responsible. The Majority Leader is responsible for scheduling floor legislation. Leader Boggs—the Majority Leader—would come to this Thursday morning meeting with a schedule for the following week. The Speaker would be there and would talk about the bills and get input from the whips. Are there any issues with these bills? Do we have a problem with them? Is there a controversy here? Are these bills in which we should take a whip count? Are we going to have a problem? Do we want to make sure we have the votes? We never wanted to—the majority party never wants to bring anything to the floor unless it’s sure it has the votes. I don’t care whether it’s the Democrats or the Republicans. They’ve got to have the votes. The House Leadership is not going to bring anything to the floor without knowing it has the votes—and the majority leadership controls the floor scheduling.

So that was the issue, should we have a whip count? The zone whips would talk about legislation that was coming up to the floor the following week and any other heads up on legislation that was still in committees. Keep in mind, these zone whip Members were from all over the country. They were on different committees. They knew what was going on in their committee and they could give a good report. The Leader and Speaker listened and decided, “Okay, I think we’d better have a whip count.” Then it was our responsibility—the Whip’s office. I was the staff person who would put together how the whip count would be asked. In other words, would Representative So-and-So vote on H.R. whatever-it-was, as reported by the such-and-such committee? Would the Member vote yes on a certain amendment to a bill?

So it depended on what the issue was in which we needed to know whether we had the votes or not—whether it was the full bill as reported by the committee, whether it was an amendment, and was the rule going to be open or not. Because at that time, every bill other than appropriations went through the Rules Committee. This is an institutional part of the House. It’s very different from the Senate. The Senate has the filibuster. But the House is not a deliberative body like the Senate, so bills that come out of the authorizing committees have to have a rule in terms of how it’s going to be considered on the floor. And the rule governs the number of hours of debate on the bill itself, the substance of the bill, and whether amendments can be offered or not. That’s an open rule or a closed rule. In our day, most of the time we wanted an open rule. Almost all bills that came out of Rules Committee had an open rule.

Now, Tip O’Neill was a member of the Rules Committee, and he had been appointed there by Speaker McCormack. When he was Whip, he was still a

member of the Rules Committee. So one of my responsibilities was always to prepare him for Rules Committee hearings in which Members would testify. Rules Committee is not for the public. The Members testify, because it's about bills coming out of the authorizing committees, after it's gone through the committee process—the hearing process, the markups, the drafting, redrafting, and the committee process—and reported ready for floor action. The Rules Committee is a leadership committee. Speaker Carl Albert viewed it as his traffic cop. In other words, bills that came out of the authorizing committees were always referred to Rules Committee. Then, Rules Committee moved the bill forward to the floor for a vote—either let it go or not—depending upon whether the leadership wanted the bill or not. So as the Speaker's traffic cop, Rules Committee could stop it, hold it, and it never would get to the floor to be debated and voted upon.

Tip O'Neill viewed the Rules Committee more as the committee that determined how we're going to consider the substantive legislation on the floor in terms of debate and amendments. We had almost all open rules at the time, which meant any amendments that were germane to the issue could be offered on the floor—unless it was a tax bill that came out of Ways and Means. You didn't want to open up the whole tax code, so then we might have a closed rule where no amendments could be offered; or a modified open rule limited to certain amendments—we used to call it a modified open rule more than a modified closed rule.

Today, that's all changed. With the current leadership—everything's a closed rule. They don't allow for any amendments. There are discharge petitions of the authorizing committee, so the authorizing committees don't even get to hold hearings. It goes right to Rules, and the leadership—the Speaker and the Rules Committee—decide what they're going to do. So it's very controlled.

There isn't—what we believed—accountability and transparency that existed in our day. Tip O'Neill kept pushing this openness as he went along as Majority Leader and became Speaker. By the time he was Speaker, he had sole authority of appointment of Members to the Rules Committee. And it really was the Speaker's committee. But as I said, it was pretty much an open rule except for the tax law. So we decided, "Okay, it's going to Rules. What kind of a rule do we want? Open rule? How many hours of debate?"

Appropriations went a separate route. They came out directly from the Appropriations Committee and usually we had three or four hours of debate on each appropriation bill. All amendments could be offered. We'd spend a whole week on appropriations, maybe even longer—depending on what the appropriation was. We had 13 appropriations at that time. Now you have 12. That was a lengthy process. And in the Whip Office, we were still operating under the old rules, before the [Congressional] Budget and Impoundment Act [of 1974]. So we had a July 1 fiscal year—that started the fiscal year—and we had 13 appropriations that we had to do. Those were each treated separately. That was something I had to get to know. I had to know what the amendments were, and of course, about earmarking items in appropriation bills. A lot of good, important district and constituent projects that Members needed were in appropriation bills.

So we would have the Whip meeting and directive to Rules Committee, and then we would form what the Whip question was going to be and make the Whip call. We'd clear it through the Leader's Office and then it would be given out to the zone whips. That was our responsibility, to send it out to the 20 zone whips and have them get the count and they'd report back. [O'Neill] would go to the Leader and the Speaker and show them the count, and they'd decide, "Okay, we can schedule it. We've got the votes." These are the

people we have to work on. These are the people that are iffy. They say yes, but really, are they going to be yes? Again, these questions arose depending upon the feedback we got from the zone whips. So it was a service operation flowing from the Speaker to the Leader and to the Members, and from the Members to the Leader and Speaker. Members would come and talk to the whips within their zones, tell them their concerns. The zone whips would express these concerns to O'Neill and he'd try to work and help the Members, which built a lot of support for him in that position.

MURPHY: Did you play a role in determining who was on board with a particular vote, or convincing certain Members?

MELCONIAN: Well, it was Member to Member. Members whom I knew pretty well and felt comfortable talking to, I would ask them, "Could you be with the leadership on such-and-such a bill?" If they were iffy, it would be interesting what they would say to me. I would convey that to Whip O'Neill. We would see if what they were saying to me was the same as what they had said to him, what they had said to the Leader or to their zone whips. Mainly it was just making sure that the Whip counts were accurate. Tip O'Neill would say, "Linda, go talk to so-and-so and see where he really is. See what you think." He'd ask my advice. But there was nobody better than the Speaker who understood the mood of the House and where Members were on a vote; he knew a real person from a faker—knew the phonies from the genuine people who served in the House.

But I was involved with the Whip call, the Whip count, the message that went out, the wording that went out on the Whip question, and I attended all of those Whip meetings. I worked very closely with the zone whips. As they worked with me and conveyed information to me and to the Whip—then Leader and Speaker—obviously we built relationships. And Washington

is all about relationships and how to count votes. So I was getting a fantastic education, Mike, in building relationships with Members. Most of my work was directly with Members at that point—other than leadership staff. It was not with their staff. That came later, in the Leader's Office and Speaker's Office. So it was building relationships with Members of the House and learning how to count votes.

The greatest teacher I had among the Members on how to count votes was Wilbur [Daigh] Mills, who was Chairman of [the] Ways and Means [Committee] before the horrible Tidal Basin affair that diminished his credibility and stature. He was so powerful. He would have dinners with Presidents—Democrats and Republicans. He knew the tax code backwards and forwards. Two or three weeks before he was going to bring a tax bill to the floor, we would see him. We wouldn't see him the rest of the time—he'd be busy in Ways and Means. Ready to bring a bill out of committee, he'd come out to the floor and he'd start renewing acquaintances. It was fascinating to watch him work. He was a pro at his best. He'd renew acquaintances—ask them about their family, children, various different things. He knew a lot about the Members and he'd ask them questions based on very personal knowledge. He'd casually comment that he had a bill coming out and wanted them to review it. "Take a look at it. See what you think. Let me know if you've got any problems with it."

He did this for a short period of time. It was schmoozing the Members, building the relationships, consolidating those relationships, renewing those relationships with, "I'm here." So at first, it was the casual kind of relationship: "Hi, how's everything going?" Then by the week before he was ready to report out the bill it would gradually build to eyeball-to-eyeball

contact. He would say to the Members, “I need your vote on this one. Are you with me?”

I remember he was doing this and I was watching it. I was standing in the back of the House. He came back and I said, “How’s it going, Mr. Chairman?” And he said, “I think it’s going pretty well. I think we’re in good shape. You tell Tip we’re in pretty good shape.” But then he said, “Don’t tell anybody else that.” I said, “Okay.” {laughter} He said, “When you count votes, you always want to have 10 in your pocket that no one knows about. You never know what can happen at the last minute. You’ve got to keep those extra 10.” And I thought, “That’s pretty shrewd. That’s sharp.” So that was part of the learning process in the Whip’s Office. I just absorbed it like a sponge, as much as I could and learned from all of them, because they were masters.

These were guys—now, you notice, Mike, I haven’t mentioned any women. We only had, I believe, 13 women Members in 1971 when I started, and when I left in 1981, there were, I believe, 21 women Members. So 13 to 21 in 10 years. And women Members were tolerated, because they were duly elected by their constituents. They had a right to be there. Were they accepted? Grudgingly, it was still a bastion of male chauvinism—particularly in the Democratic Cloakroom. Women Members were not comfortable going in back there with the cigars, cigarettes, smelly {laughter} lounge area—male Members sleeping on the couches. It was just very uncomfortable. They had every right to be there. They were duly elected Members of Congress. But it just was uncomfortable. So most women Members, at least when I first started in the Whip Office and later in the Leader’s Office—it changed as we got into the Speaker’s Office—they would come to the floor, and they would cast their vote. They might sit on the floor for a bit, but then they’d go back

to their offices and do their work. They were busy doing their constituent and committee work as Congresswomen.

MURPHY:

It's an interesting point of comparison, because you walked onto the floor, your first job as a staff member, and you have women Members who are also there. Did you see a significant difference in the way that men—elected Members of Congress or staff members—treated you or treated the women Members of Congress?

MELCONIAN:

Well, I think the Members grew very respectful toward me as they got to know me and they could see my abilities and talents. Tip O'Neill was one of the most popular Members of the House; and the fact that he had this confidence in me really helped me so tremendously to be able to gain the respect of the Members. Again, I think it was the younger Members who felt much more comfortable with me than some of the older Members or the committee chairs. You know, at that time, Congress at work was Congress in committees; Congress in committees was Congress at work. Everything was committees, and the committee chairmen were barons. They had more power than the leadership. They had more resources available to them than the leadership at that point, until we broke the automatic seniority system for committee chairs. We defeated three committee chairs when [O'Neill] became Leader. But that was a couple years later. Female Members didn't spend a lot of time on the floor. They were in their committees, and they were working in their offices.

MURPHY:

Did you see a different approach by men who were Members of Congress, to long-serving women Members—someone like Martha [Wright] Griffiths or Edith [Starrett] Green—when you compare that to how they interacted with someone like Bella [Savitsky] Abzug of New York, who was elected in the

early '70s? Was there a different approach on the floor between those two different groups of women?

MELCONIAN:

Well, personality is as important as substance—the politics of personality here. That's what you're dealing with when you mention those three women. You have Martha Griffiths, who was the only female member of Ways and Means. As you know, Mike, the three important committees in the House are Ways and Means, Appropriations, and Rules. I don't recall that any woman initially served on Appropriations or Rules. I know there were no women on Rules when I first got there. Yet, Martha Griffiths was on Ways and Means. She was the one that spearheaded the Equal Rights Amendment, which happened when I was there, and I'd like to talk about that a little later. But she was very well respected. She was knowledgeable. I think she was well respected by Wilbur Mills and the committee, as well as on the floor. But she was very conscientious and always did her homework.

Edith Green, I think, became a subcommittee chair while I was there. She had been in the House a long time and she was an education expert. She also was responsible for getting the Equal Pay Act through [in 1963]—although that didn't include female employees in the House. {laughter} Female legislative assistants were paid, probably, \$10,000 to \$15,000 less than their male counterparts for doing the same amount of work. And administrative assistants, which today would be called chiefs of staff, were paid maybe \$20,000 less, if there were any women in that position.

There were a few legislative assistants, and as the '70s rolled on, some women were administrative assistants. You had fewer positions in the House offices then—in the congressional offices—than you do today. Today, you have the legislative director—the overall director. Then you have the legislative assistant, you have the legislative correspondent, you have the chief of staff,

you have a communications or press person, and you may have an outreach person. It's very different today, but you had smaller staffs then—and with more responsibilities. The two professional positions were the legislative assistant and the administrative assistant, in my day. Very few women were in those positions as staff people.

But women Members of Congress—Edith Green and Martha Griffiths, especially, had been there awhile. They'd moved up through the ranks. They worked hard. And I think they were respected. Bella Abzug was another story. She came in 1970. They called her “Loudmouth Bella.” She was progressive. She was an active and vocal member of the Democratic Study Group, which grew to prominence during the '70s—and that would be the Progressive Caucus today—to counteract the conservative Southern committee chair barons and subcommittee chair barons. Bella Abzug was aggressive. She was assertive. She didn't mince words. She would swear. She was rough and tough. And she wore a hat. She was abrasive, and the male Members didn't like that.

It was interesting. I can recall one of the last things that the Majority Leader, Hale Boggs, said to me before the end of that session when he left for Alaska and disappeared in Alaska. He went out for [Nicholas Joseph] Nick Begich, who was the Congressman from Alaska, and disappeared in a plane out there. We don't know what happened. Crashed—never found his body. But one of the last things he said to me was, “Linda, it's a pleasure working with you here. We're delighted that you're here.” He said, “We've got a lot of females running around here, but very few ladies—and you're a real lady.”

I took that as a compliment coming from Hale Boggs. I knew his wife, who was terrific. She succeeded him, [Corinne Claiborne] Lindy Boggs. And her stature was different, too, when she came into Congress because she had been

involved. She had already chaired [presidential] inaugural committees. She was very actively involved with the Democratic campaign committees. She campaigned. She was campaigning with her husband. She was the campaign manager. And she was very active with the women—the wives—so she was a known commodity. She was tough and sharp—but she was a real lady. They liked her and respected her, so she was accepted.

But Bella was always viewed as a brash New York outsider. I think she was right on the issues, but she wasn't there to win friends. She was there to push her agenda. She was there to have her voice heard on those issues. And she didn't care who she stepped on, who she tread upon. She was tolerated because she had to be tolerated as an elected Member, but never really fully accepted.

MURPHY: This prevailing masculine culture of the House, did you see that change over the course of the '70s? Did you see things improve a little bit during your times there, in terms of the way you were treated—the way women employees were treated, for example?

MELCONIAN: Well, I think it changed when O'Neill was Leader, and certainly changed when we were in the Speaker's Office. More women served—well, a growing number of women. Most importantly, the democratization of the House occurred throughout this period of the '70s.

Two great things happened, I think, if you look at the '70s in the House. One, the democratization of the House was made possible through breaking down the automatic seniority system for election of committee chairs. Two, the assignment of Members to committees was removed from the Ways and Means Committee to the Steering and Policy Committee that was the executive board of the Democratic Caucus. Under Speaker O'Neill, the

Steering and Policy Committee became a real force in terms of working with the Members. It was the eyes and ears of the leadership—of the Speaker—on the committee process, and bills in committees, and Rules Committee, and working with them to develop Democratic policy and develop the policy agenda. So the leadership—the Speaker—got involved more in the development of public policy on the committee level through the Steering and Policy Committee. That was a tremendous change.

Also, taking away from the Ways and Means Committee—taking away the assignment of Members to committees—was one hurdle that helped in the democratization, because it removed the committee assignment process away from a lot of the special interests. Ways and Means has jurisdiction over Medicare, Medicaid, health insurance, taxes social security—all important matters. Every special interest goes before Ways and Means; and if that committee serves also as the committee on committees, lobbyists can have a lot of influence on how Members are assigned to committees and to which committees—particularly lobbyists that have clients before those committees. So this was real democratization: more accountability, more transparency, more opportunity.

The Steering and Policy Committee as the committee on committees was great, because Members would bargain back and forth. The country was divided into zones, and the Members on the Steering and Policy Committee would be elected from their zones. Some wanted this Member from their zone who was newly elected to serve on this committee. Others wanted their zone Member on that committee and they would negotiate. It was an open process. And with that Democratic Caucus change on the committee chairs, there also was the change of subcommittee chairs. This is what really helped women. Each new Member who came in was assigned to a full committee

and then had his or her choice of which subcommittee he or she wanted. Before, the chairman would assign a new Member to subcommittees and that Member didn't have any say in where he/she was on the committee.

This helped women who now could choose the subcommittee they wanted to be on. They had more opportunity to get on the full committee that they wanted. They could choose the subcommittee they wanted, and that would build their seniority to become, eventually, chairs of committees. So it opened the door of opportunity for women, and I think this was an unintended consequence, {laughter} quite frankly, of the change in the Steering and Policy Committee as the committee on committees. The Steering and Policy Committee, through the tenure of Tip O'Neill's leadership as Leader and Speaker, became not only the committee on committees, but also the real eyes and ears of the Speaker with the authorizing committees, in terms of developing policy. And I think that helped women get into positions of leadership. Today, women are subcommittee chairs. They're full committee chairs. I think Edith Green was the only subcommittee chairwoman that I can recall during the tenure I was there.

The other thing that happened when we were in the Leader's Office, was change in the membership. The 93rd, 94th, and 95th Congresses [1973–1979], I think it was, were ones where we had more and more of a Democratic majority. You had younger Members coming in. The younger male Members were less chauvinistic. They were proud and privileged to be there as Members of Congress. They had worked hard. They respected the women Members who had to go through the same process as they did to get there. They didn't feel, "Women don't belong here, this is our territory." They weren't interested in controlling. They wanted to have input. They

wanted to remove control from the barons that were preventing them from achieving leadership positions or would prevent them from achieving leadership positions. So the new Members—males or females—were all in it together to get more opportunity for themselves.

Many of the new Members—male and female—joined this Democratic Study Group, which would be the equivalent of the Progressive Caucus today, to fight against and counteract the committee barons that existed. Initially, the Democratic Study Group worked in the early '70s mainly against the Vietnam War—ending our involvement in Vietnam. But it also grew to look at other issues. How are we going to change the rules—make the rules more open for opportunity for younger Members? How are we going to get rid of committee chairs, the automatic seniority system? What about ethics? What about television?

The Democratic Study Group was pushing very hard to have televised hearings. The first televised hearings in the House that I can recall when I was there were the impeachment proceedings in the Judiciary Committee. Then later, when Tip O'Neill was Leader and then Speaker, he was always supportive of televised hearings. Congressman [Charles Grandison] Charlie Rose [III], who was from North Carolina, was very instrumental. He was a newer Member pushing to get televised hearings and convinced Tip O'Neill that it should be done. It should be done sooner rather than later. So Tip O'Neill, when he became Speaker, one of the first things he did was authorized closed-circuit TV for a trial period, a pilot program, for 90 days.

Prior to that, Carl Albert was cautious. He was concerned, and he listened to the committee chairs—the Southern barons that ruled the House at the time. “This is going to change the institution. It's going to ruin the business that we're here to do for the people. It's going to interfere with that. We're going

to have to change rules and procedures. How are the Members going to respond to that? We're going to have a lot of prima donnas. Who's going to control it? We'll have no control over it." There were all of these negative concerns raised.

Tip O'Neill summarily just dismissed them and said, "We're going to have a process. We're going to have a pilot program. We're going to work out the kinks. All of these concerns we can address. We're going to see closed circuit, see how it works." The key decision he made, that I think minimized the opposition toward television, was the fact that it would not pan the whole House Floor, but would focus on the person who was speaking on the floor. Also, the Speaker's Office would control it. We would have a legislative appropriation where the House itself would buy the cameras and install the cameras. I think it was \$1.2 or \$1.3 million or something like that amount. They had six cameras in the basement of the Capitol. It would be controlled through the leadership—through the Speaker's Office—in terms of what was televised, when it was televised, and how it was televised.

Members accepted it. I think the fact that the precedent of the impeachment proceedings had gone so well and opened up the public's mind of what was going on in the committees helped Members to see its advantage. The public saw how brilliant some of the Members, particularly Barbara [Charline] Jordan, were on that impeachment committee [the House Judiciary Committee] that a lot of the constituents in various districts were saying, "We really want to see—we want to learn what's going on in the House." Now, a lot of what happens, as you know, on the House Floor, just as in committees, is pretty tedious and boring. But there's a lot of information exchanged when an exciting bill comes up. You want to hear it. You want to

know what's going on. You want to follow it. You don't have to be a political junkie to want to know what's going on in the People's House.

MURPHY: Did that significantly change the everyday interactions between Members, or how Members approached their work every day, because they knew the cameras were there?

MELCONIAN: Yes. Well, what I observed was yes. Debates were longer. {laughter} More speeches, a lot of special orders. People would prep—and wore more colorful clothes. Prior to TV coverage, it was the standard business suit. The white shirt; very nebulous, conservative tie; conservative gray, brown, black suit. But under the camera's spotlight, it was more colorful—and particularly the women would dress in colors like I have now, very bright colors that showed up. Two colors that came out were blue and red—well, blue for everybody. Everybody had to get blue shirts or a blue tie or a red tie or something like that. Then for women: red. Red became power. Red is a power color and women liked to wear red because it made them feel more powerful. Maybe it built their confidence. I don't know. When I was at the state senate, I used to wear red a lot to show power.

So I think the dress changed a bit and the prima donnas engaged in longer debates. But it went smoothly, and it was, I think, positive and good.

Anytime you use new technology, Mike, I think there's always unintended negative consequences. There's always the good with the bad.

What happened was that Newt Gingrich got elected at the end of the '70s and into the early '80s. He, in my view, abused the TV coverage—used it, manipulated it, so that conservative Republican Members could take back the ideology of the House. In Gingrich's view it had gone too far to the progressives. He would use special orders and the one-minute speeches to

lash out against Members and get other conservative Republicans to lash out against Democratic Members. The special orders, the one-minute speeches at the beginning—before TV—they were used mainly to make reference to a Member's constituents. The House had special orders for an Eagle Scout, a Gold Star mother, maybe somebody who passed away, somebody renowned who had just been honored in the district. So it was more honorary and constituent-oriented. Nobody ever lashed out against Members.

When I was there, it was a wonderful place to work, because whether Democrat or Republican, conservative or liberal, Members tried to work for the best interests of the constituents they represented, and they realized that there had to be give and take. They weren't going to get everything they wanted. There was a willingness to compromise. Compromise was not a dirty word. They were willing to negotiate and there wasn't this nastiness and meanness. They'd fight the good fight and they'd argue against the opponent on the issue, but about 80 percent were bipartisan issues. They didn't get into excessive partisan wrangling. They weren't nasty. They never took things so personally that they were mean-spirited and nasty towards the other person. They didn't bash the other person. In other words, if a Member said something was a bad idea, another Member wouldn't say it was pathetic. They wouldn't use language and words that were really derogatory, mean-spirited, nasty, and really offensive to the other person. They wouldn't lash out against the person as an individual; rather they would focus on opposing the issue itself and why it was a bad idea.

Later, it became very personalized—and that was messaging. It was no longer how we can get into the legislative process and how we can work together to get to yes. It was how we can bash the other person, how we can get that message out to make that person look so bad. That started with Newt

Gingrich and it's carrying on today. It's unfortunate, because I think that is one of the unintended consequences of televised hearings.

END OF PART ONE — BEGINNING OF PART TWO

MURPHY: I thought it might be interesting to take a step back and talk a little bit about the way that men viewed women working on the House Floor. We talked a little bit about a kind of reluctant acceptance of women staff members. In what ways did they talk about women on the floor as employees? Did they understand what was going on here—the changes that were happening—or did they view women on the House Floor as something that they were not quite ready to accept?

MELCONIAN: I think it was a bit of the latter. Again, it was transitional. At first, when I was working in—and I can't remember whether it was the Whip Office or the Leader's Office—but there was a woman who was a great mentor to me, Janice Lipsen, who worked for Speaker Carl Albert. She also had House Floor privileges for a period of time and she and I would work together. We bonded. We were wonderful. I can remember we talked to women Members. We talked to male Members. We talked to everybody.

One time, we were talking to other female Members and maybe there were three or four of us—two staff people and one or two Members. Male Members would come over to us and say, "Oh, what are you girls cooking up? Are you conspiring against us?" And we'd say, "Why would we be conspiring against you? We're just talking girl talk." "Oh." And they'd look at us—not quite believing us—but it was sort of a satisfactory answer so they'd walk away. It was funny. Three or more women—whether it was two staff people and a Member or two Members and one staff person—three or more women on the floor congregating—chatting—would cause concern

among the male Members. Were we conspiring against them? What I found so fascinating about this experience is that years later, when I served in the Massachusetts senate during my freshman year, I was talking to two other female members. I had male state senators come up to us and say, “Are you three conspiring against us?” I thought, “I can’t believe this. It’s happening here in Massachusetts years later—the same thing that happened on the House Floor in Washington.”

I remember one incident when we had an intern working in the Speaker’s office in the summer. Speaker O’Neill and I were both on the House Floor at the time. The intern was acting as receptionist, answering phones. One of the male Congressmen called and was looking for me. “Where’s Linda? I need to talk to her. Is Linda around? It’s Congressman So-and-So.” The intern got a little flustered that a Congressman was on the phone, and said, “Oh, uh, no. She’s not here, Congressman. She’s on the floor with the Speaker. She’s on the floor with the Speaker.” He paused for a minute, and he said to her, {laughter} “Will you tell one of them to get up off the floor and come to the phone and talk to me?” And she got really flustered.

But the other thing was, of course, pay—in terms of how Members felt about professional women being paid. There were few of us. Now, one particular committee person was Jonalyn Cullen, who was the committee staff counsel for the Rules Committee. She and I were very close, too. She later became the committee counsel for [Chester] Trent Lott, when he became the Rules Committee chair. She was from Mississippi. But [William Meyers] Colmer, I think, was the chairman when I was there. Colmer really liked her, and she was great. Tip O’Neill liked her. Everybody on the Rules Committee worked with her. She worked with Democrats, Republicans, conservatives, liberals. She and I were miles apart philosophically. I was a liberal from

Massachusetts. She was a Mississippi conservative—a Democrat, but really a Republican. She was a Republican in Democratic clothing from Mississippi. So we were miles apart in terms of ideology and philosophy, but we got along and we worked together for the best interest of the House. She was always supportive, helpful, and informative. Members liked her—both Democrats and Republicans.

I remember when a book came out about employee salaries and some of the Members on the floor—male Members—were looking at it. Members of the Rules Committee looked, and they said, “Jonalyn, did you see the salary she’s getting?” I went over there and they looked at me. I said, “What’s wrong with that?” They said, “Well, she’s a woman. She shouldn’t be earning this kind of money.” Then they realized they were saying it to another woman who was a professional staff person. And I didn’t earn what she earned at that point, by any means. But I looked at them and I kind of froze for a minute. I said, “You all like her, don’t you? You all work well with her, don’t you? Don’t you think she deserves what she’s worth? She earns every bit of it,” and walked away. The subject never came up again, but that was the attitude that they had toward women staff.

MURPHY: So as you progressed through these three offices in these different stages of your career on Capitol Hill, you went from the Whip Office to Majority Leader O’Neill’s office. How did your job change at that point in the mid-’70s?

MELCONIAN: Well, in the Whip Office, as I said, I did the whip organization, whip counts—all of that. We did Rules Committee. Now, when Tip O’Neill became Leader, he was no longer a member of the Rules Committee. He was involved with scheduling of floor legislation. I always continued to work on issues before the Rules Committee. Anything that came out of Rules

Committee and floor legislation was always my responsibility—Whip Office, Leader’s Office, and Speaker’s Office—so that was a continuum all the way through the three offices.

But when he became Leader, we had just fought the big fight on the Vietnam caucus resolution to force the Foreign Affairs Committee to report out within 30 days a date certain to end the Vietnam War—because, quite frankly, [President Richard Milhous] Nixon’s Vietnamization was clearly not working. Tip O’Neill worked in concert with Members of the Democratic Study Group and took charge of that resolution. It passed the caucus and the Foreign Affairs Committee was able to report out a resolution. The Senate had passed several resolutions since 1969 about ending funding, or bringing about a date certain to end the war. The House had not had a clear vote on any amendment or a resolution to end the war that was offered by a House Member. Tip O’Neill changed that. That was an important dimension for him when he was Whip, because it really ingratiated him with the progressive caucus, the Democratic Study Group, the liberals. It showed that he was willing to fight for his principles and fight for some of the liberal causes that they cared about. They saw him as a real leader who knew how to work the House, work the Members, was hardworking, and could get the votes that were needed.

In the end it was a pyrrhic victory in terms of getting the House Foreign Affairs Committee to act, because when the committee finally reported out the bill three or four months later—the foreign aid bill—it had the date of October 1 and we were already into August, September. The date was impossible. You couldn’t end the war in that time frame. [Gerald Rudolph] Jerry Ford [Jr.] was the Minority Leader. The Republican conservatives were very good at depicting this as, “Oh, we must change the date on the floor—

it's unrealistic on October 1. We're going to change it to December 31," which is an amendment that was offered. "We're just going to extend the killing." And the liberals wouldn't vote for that and it just defeated the whole process. Of course, the war ended a year later. But in any case, the important step had been taken by the House. It had a vote on an amendment or resolution that was offered by a Member of the House, that originated in the House. It was the largest vote [in the House] in support for bringing about an end to the Vietnam War. So it set the stage for what happened later. A lot of things that were done in the Whip Office and the Leader's Office were done that set the stage for victory in the future.

In the Leader's Office, I continued to work the floor. One of the first things O'Neill did—he supported the freshmen's special order. An issue that really was gaining ground was the issue of impoundment. Congress appropriates. The President signs or vetoes it. Congress overrides it or sustains it. What the Congress has appropriated, the President is mandated by the Constitution to spend. All Presidents since [Franklin Delano] Roosevelt, and even before, impounded some monies. Usually it was an emergency. There was a legitimate reason for them to hold up and not spend the money that had been appropriated. But Nixon abused it to the point where it became a constitutional crisis. He expected the Congress to appropriate the budget as he passed it—for the programs he wanted. If Congress initiated any other programs they wanted that he didn't like, he just wouldn't spend the money. So that became a problem. We were calling it the "imperial presidency." Of course, Congress had abdicated some of its responsibility over the years because it didn't hold Presidents accountable for the fact that they were impounding all this money. But Nixon abused it to the point where it became a crisis.

By the time we got into the Leader's Office, impoundment was a mounting problem. Now, we had 13 appropriations. We got them done on time, but then the President would impound half the money and we'd spend all this time overriding vetoes and he still wouldn't spend the money. He was setting the policy agenda by impounding money. That's when the Budget and Impoundment Control Act came out. We were in the Leader's Office. We worked on that bill which set impoundment control with rescissions and deferrals. It set up the Budget Committees of the House and Senate. It set up the Congressional Budget Office, which was going to be the arm of the Congress to get accurate information about the revenues, the economy, and budget decisions. And it set a timetable for budget action by the Congress, caps for the Appropriations Committee, and also changed the fiscal year from July 1 to October 1. That was a huge change. It reasserted Congress' constitutional authority as a coequal branch. It basically reasserted that the power of the purse belongs to the legislative branch.

There also was the War Powers Act and, of course, there was impeachment. Much of O'Neill's first term [93rd Congress, 1973–1975] as Leader was consumed by the House impeachment investigation. A number of new Members were upset with the imperial presidency, and wanted to see an investigation of the President. Should I talk about impeachment?

MURPHY: What role did then-Majority Leader O'Neill play in the decision to start the ball rolling for an investigation?

MELCONIAN: He played a major role. Speaker Albert was cautious. He was very concerned that it would look like it was a partisan vendetta—particularly because we were having this fight with the President over impoundments. The impoundment issue had reached such a constitutional crisis, Republicans were arguing, "Oh, you're going to use that. You want to impeach, you want

to do this investigation.” But Tip O’Neill had an uncanny sense that something was wrong here, and he said to Chairman [Peter Wallace] Rodino [Jr.], “You better get ready. We’re going to have to do this investigation.”

Now, Pete Rodino didn’t want to do it, either. He was the chairman of the Judiciary Committee and he was a little bit cautious because he was new on the job. His predecessor was Emanuel Celler, who was a legendary legal scholar and had been there for years and was chairman of the Judiciary Committee. He was beaten by Elizabeth Holtzman, a woman. That was uncalled for. Can you imagine this unknown woman beat Manny Celler? So Pete Rodino became the chairman of the Judiciary Committee—untried, new on the job.

Thus, Speaker Albert was at first cautious. He didn’t want it to look like a partisan vendetta. He wasn’t sure whether Rodino could handle the job. Could he live up to the task? Tip O’Neill had every confidence in Pete Rodino. He liked Pete Rodino, knew Pete Rodino very well. They came from the same type of background in urban politics. They had the same basic philosophy. He knew he could do the job, but he also knew that the Congress had to move and that the House had to start this investigation—had to determine one way or the other whether or not there was obstruction of justice and whether or not Nixon had participated in the cover up.

Majority Leader O’Neill kept importuning Carl Albert. “Let’s get the resolution going. Let’s have the Judiciary [Committee] do the investigation.” Speaker Albert hesitated: “Well, maybe we should create a special committee. Maybe we should have the House dissolve itself into the Committee of the Whole and consider it.” O’Neill came in one day and said to me, “Look. Over the weekend, go to the library. Check out the Judiciary—is there anything in the Constitution—is there anything that prevents the Judiciary

Committee from doing this?” I said, “Well, the jurisdiction of the Judiciary Committee is to hold impeachment hearings for any federal official who may commit treason, bribery, or high crimes and misdemeanors.” So I said, “It’s under their jurisdiction. They have that authority. They’ve already been authorized to do that.” “Well, check it out and see,” he said.

So I went to the library. I spent a rainy Saturday in the Georgetown University law library, looking up precedents, reading the Federalist Papers, reading the Constitution’s provision on impeachment, looking at any legal articles that had been written—all that legal research. I was in law school at the time, so it was kind of fascinating. I enjoyed doing this. I realized the Judiciary Committee had been formed back in the early 1800s, and that it was the Judiciary Committee members who floor managed the only other impeachment we had of President [Andrew] Johnson after the Civil War.

I found nothing in my research that precluded the Judiciary Committee from the impeachment investigation. It was fine. The committee had been involved in the previous impeachment, the precedent that had been set over a hundred years ago. So armed with that information, O’Neill went to the Speaker, and the Speaker said, “Okay. I think we have to let Rodino go forward with it.” The Speaker made the decision. We prepared a resolution authorizing the Judiciary Committee to investigate and gave the whole committee subpoena powers. And so the process began.

Yes, Tip O’Neill was really instrumental in getting that investigation going in the House and making sure that it was the Judiciary Committee and Pete Rodino who headed it. The term that we used constantly was, “The investigation shall be done with “deliberate speed,” which is an oxymoron. Deliberate means you deliberate over a period of time—but with speed, you move on it. Do it right, do it legally, make sure it’s right, and make sure you

are not engaged in any partisan vendetta. How do we bring the Republicans on board? That's why we wanted subpoena powers for the whole committee, not just the chairman and the ranking Republican. Let them go through the process and report.

So it went on and on, and it got pretty tedious. It was droning on and on. They were investigating and listening to all of these tapes. It was a fascinating period to be here, because you wanted to get the *Washington Post* before you got your coffee in the morning. [Bob] Woodward and [Carl] Bernstein were coming out with story after story, and each story as the months went on was getting closer and closer to the President. Was there obstruction of justice? Did he know about the cover up? Did he participate in the cover up? Did he sanction the cover up? That would be the high crimes and misdemeanors.

Members of the Judiciary Committee would listen to these tapes and come onto the floor to vote—we had electronic voting by this time. Other Members would come in and they'd vote and leave. They might hang around for a while. But many of the Judiciary Committee members came in—after they had listened to these tapes weeks after weeks as part of the impeachment investigation—and hung around on the floor for a while, because they had to go back to this tedium. So far, nothing was emerging that seemed an impeachable offense.

One day, I was on the floor and we had a vote. We had an electronic vote. I noticed the members of the Judiciary Committee came in, quickly voted, and disappeared. Then Chairman Rodino came over to me and said, "Where's Tip? I've got to talk to him. Can you find him for me?" I said, "Yes, Mr. Chairman." I went into the Democratic Cloakroom, called Leo in the office and said, "Where's the Leader?" I didn't know where he was. I said, "Get him on the floor ASAP. Find him and get him on the floor." I said, "Something's

happened in Judiciary. The Members are disappearing after they vote, and Pete Rodino has a very worried look on his face, and wants to speak to the Leader ASAP.” So I chatted with Rodino. Again, I was staff. I didn’t say, “What’s up? What’s going on?” I chatted about other things, floor matters, whatever. A few minutes later, the Leader came on the floor, and of course, I left them, and they talked. That was the 18-minute gap [in the recordings from the Nixon White House]. That’s when they knew they had grounds for impeachment.

It was fascinating. And we knew this 48 hours—days before it was reported in the paper. That was a big difference then from now. The minute something like that happens today—first of all, there’d be a leak. The Judiciary Committee didn’t leak anything—Democrats or Republicans, leadership, the House Republican Leadership, Democratic Leadership—on any of this investigation. They didn’t leak things to the press. So we knew what was going on sometimes a day, three days before we’d read about it in the paper. We felt we had this advanced knowledge that we couldn’t reveal, we couldn’t talk to anybody about it. Yet, we were privileged to be in this position to have this advanced notice.

MURPHY:

So as Majority Leader, those are some very significant issues he had to deal with. When he transitioned to the Speaker’s role, how did he approach that change in title? Did he set an agenda for the beginning of his Speakership? Did he talk to the staff about what you wanted to achieve?

MELCONIAN:

Yes. Well, he was, as I told you, elected Leader and elected Speaker. By the time he was Speaker, he was the most popular man in the House. He pretty much had no opposition. Sam [Melville] Gibbons ran against him, but as one of the Congressmen who seconded his nomination from the South said, “Tip O’Neill knows no east, no west, no north, no south. He’s All-

American.” I thought that summed it up very well. He had been responsive to everybody.

Now, one of the things we had done in the Leader’s Office—and this was one of the changes in my responsibilities—he went out and campaigned for Democratic Members to get re-elected. He’d go out to their districts. They would approach him, or come to me, and say, “Will Tip come out and speak? I’ve got an event coming up.” One of my responsibilities was to work with the Member, to work with his staff, find out who the staff person was with whom I should be speaking here in Washington or in the district. Then, I would put together the event portfolio of what Tip O’Neill should say in his remarks—what the audience was, what the district was about. I had to do a lot of research to prepare the Speaker. We’d have his folder and the remarks. Sometimes they were prepared remarks. Sometimes they were bullet points and ideas, things to talk about. I’d give him whatever backup I thought he needed. But he had to know the audience, had to know what issues he needed to talk about that were helpful to the Member and what issues he should stay away from in that district. It was a learning experience for all of us. It helped us to get to know the Members better—and their districts and their concerns—as we were preparing for the Speakership. Once he became Leader, the campaign was on to become Speaker.

As Speaker, the first item on the agenda for him was to have the strongest ethics of any legislative body in the world. We had had some scandals—Member scandals—mostly accounting, financial scandals. He put together a task force. It was a task force, I think, that had started its work when he was Leader, but as Speaker he made it report recommendations to the House. The report changed the honorarium level, changed how much a Member could earn in outside income, revoked the franking privilege a certain period

before elections, got rid of unauthorized accounts, and required disclosure of income, assets, and liabilities. At the time, it was extremely strong, the first time the House limited honorariums and outside incomes. Today, we've gone way beyond that, but this was unheard of at that time.

[O'Neill] was very serious about it. The Members were interested in doing it to protect themselves. In the Democratic Study Group, progressives were very supportive of a new ethics package as well as campaign reform. So he put this together. It passed, and he created a special Rules Committee structure to enforce it—so it was a tiger that had teeth in it.

That was one of his responsibilities as Speaker. The Speaker has control over all special and joint committee appointments. Tip O'Neill also made the Rules Committee his committee, in the sense of controlling all appointments to the Rules Committee while he was Speaker. He was consolidating more power in the Speaker's Office, in terms of appointments, the use of the Steering and Policy Committee as the committee on committees that became the Speaker's committee, and working through the Steering and Policy Committee with the committee chairs. But the strongest ethics package was one of his first priorities.

O'Neill created an energy task force. By this time, the Steering and Policy Committee was really the committee on committees and making all the committee assignments. He created a Select Committee on Intelligence, and made Eddie Boland the chairman—his roommate and my Congressman. All of these changes were occurring, and newer Members were appointed to these committees, so it opened up opportunity for younger Members—which included newer women Members who were elected—to be on these important committees.

As Speaker he got involved more in foreign policy. We didn't do much with foreign policy in the Whip Office and the Leader's Office, but as Speaker, he's chief protocol officer of the legislative branch. He's the chief administrator of the House. He's second in line to the presidency after the President and Vice President. Anything happens to the two of them, he becomes the President. And he's the chief parliamentarian of the House. As the chief protocol officer for the legislative branch, he's more involved in foreign policy.

One of the things that was initiated during his Speakership were the Foreign Affairs Committee "teas." It was a woman staff person, Elizabeth Daoust, who initiated them. If we had a foreign dignitary or foreign delegation, a prime minister, a foreign minister from another country who came here and wanted to meet with the House Foreign Affairs Committee members, she would organize these "teas" in the afternoon usually, and would invite Tip O'Neill to speak. He would start it off. He would speak, or Chairman [Thomas Ellsworth] Doc Morgan, and then Chairman [Clement John] Zablocki would introduce him, and he would give a speech.

Now, these speeches—depending on the sensitivity of the relationship we had with the country—sometimes had to be cleared with the State Department. So I was in charge of all of that and I wrote the speeches. Usually these were more formal speeches. They weren't just ideas or bullet points, because we wanted to be sure that he [Speaker O'Neill] would not go off the cuff and say something that would create havoc over at the State Department in terms of any delicate negotiations that we were engaged in with some of these foreign leaders. We had delegations from Morocco, from Norway, from China, European Parliament, the Supreme Soviet at the time—because it was still the Soviet Union—China, King Hussein of Jordan.

And most importantly, [President Anwar] Sadat of Egypt and [Prime Minister] Menachem Begin of Israel, because it was also during his Speakership that we had the Camp David Accords. President [James Earl “Jimmy”] Carter had both Begin and Sadat at Camp David to negotiate the agreement that later became a formal treaty between the two countries.

One of the things Tip O’Neill told me during that period was to make sure that none of the “radical libs” did anything stupid on the floor—offered a resolution, offered anything that in any way would endanger the discussions and negotiations that were going on at Camp David. We were afraid that some of the more liberal Members, some of the particularly pro-Israel Members, some of the Jewish Members of Congress, might come up and say something, offer a resolution, offer a special order, that in any way—unintentionally—would negatively impact the Camp David negotiations. Many Members just wanted to help the process and help Israel if they could. So I was really the “eyes and ears,” making sure none of this happened. And it didn’t happen. When people were thinking about saying something, we sent the message out that if they were going to say anything about the peace process—we didn’t prevent anybody from making a comment, but we made it clear that this was not the appropriate time to talk about what’s going on at Camp David or any of the issues involved. They were too sensitive.

Now, after the accords were reached—and this was one of the highlights of working there, [O’Neill] shared with us a story that President Carter told the leadership when they went to the White House after the accords. “How did you get them to reach an agreement?” asked O’Neill. The President said it was tough. This was one of the toughest negotiations in the world. They hated each other from generations of enmity between these two nations.

{laughter} Go back to the Bible. The Israelis—children of Israel—were slaves in Egypt before Moses brought them out—delivered them.

President Carter said getting them to talk to each other, to be civil to each other, that was an effort. They kept talking. He said several times each one of them was angry enough to leave. As the discussions and negotiation continued, he started talking about grandchildren. They all had grandchildren. President Carter and both President Sadat and Prime Minister Begin had grandchildren. They were very proud grandparents. They would sit there. They would be civil talking about their grandchildren. President Carter said they did this a few times. At one point, it dawned on the two of them, almost simultaneously, “However we feel about each other, we are sitting here, and we have the capacity to prevent our grandchildren from facing each other in war and prevent the killing of one or all of our grandchildren, whom we love so much. We have that ability, that power to do this, if we stick to the task and come to an agreement.” He said whenever the negotiation got bad after that, or it looked like it was going to break up, that they couldn’t reach an agreement, they’d start talking about the grandchildren.

So when Menachem Begin came [to the House Foreign Affairs Committee “tea”] a year and a half later, we put in the O’Neill speech about his grandchildren. “We know you’re a proud grandparent,” and made that reference. That’s not in the history books. You won’t hear that. But that was one of the fascinating human interest stories about the Camp David Accords, and why Begin and Sadat realized they had to come to an agreement, whether they wanted to or not, whether they liked each other or not. It was for the future and the future generations.

MURPHY:

Tip O'Neill's role in international affairs seems like something somewhat revolutionary for Speakers. This wasn't something that Carl Albert was involved with. Did he consciously say that he wanted to use this position in this way?

MELCONIAN:

Well, no. I think what happened is, the House has tradition. Tip O'Neill was a change agent in every way—and also in international affairs. He was a change agent about progressive issues such as his position on the Vietnam War. He was a change agent on the issue of abolishing the automatic seniority system for committee chairs and opening up subcommittees, the whole idea of the committee on committees and the role of the Steering and Policy Committee, the Whip organization, the ethics bill. All of these were changes that were occurring, that were part of the democratization, I think, of the House at the time. In foreign policy, of course, he had gone against the leadership.

Carl Albert and Hale Boggs had been supportive of the President on Vietnam. Go back to the [Samuel Taliaferro] Rayburn days and even before. In terms of foreign policy, there was an unwritten rule in the Congress, that the President is the commander-in-chief. And Sam Rayburn would go to the White House and say, "Okay, you tell us what you want. Partisan politics ends at the water's edge. You tell us what you need in foreign policy, defense, whatever, and we'll get it to your desk for a signature." That was pretty much the philosophy, that the President had jurisdiction over foreign policy. Of course, after the Vietnam War that changed, because of the declaration of war issue and Congress reasserting its constitutional power in the declaration of war when we commit troops abroad.

So that carried on into some of these other areas of foreign policy where I think Speaker O'Neill felt that, in certain areas, the Congress—and he as

Speaker—had an obligation and responsibility to assert the congressional role in determining foreign policy. The House always played secondary to the Senate in foreign affairs. There was a joke that the Senators used to say when I was there. You had the Foreign Relations Committee in the Senate, and the Foreign Affairs Committee in the House. The House was only capable of an affair. The Senate was capable of a relationship. And there's a big difference between a relationship and an affair.

I think that Tip O'Neill, as Speaker O'Neill, felt most strongly about his ancestral home, Ireland, and what, if anything, he could do to try to bring about peace in Ireland. Mike, you understand when he was Speaker was at the height of the Troubles. It was when Gerry Adams and the IRA [Irish Republican Army] were bombing everything. When we went to England, we couldn't get into the Parliament because they had bombed close to the Parliament. O'Neill wanted to see who the players were in Northern Ireland, and the Republic of Ireland, and obviously in Britain—whether or not there was an interest in moving to peace. Did they want to stop this killing? This killing was getting terrible—this bombing. The Republic of Ireland was starting at that time in the '70s to turn around because of its membership in the European Union, so that was an important dimension.

Speaker O'Neill had the opportunity to go to Ireland, and a staff member, the counsel—and I was the assistant counsel by that time—Kirk O'Donnell and I were the two staff people designated to go with him. We went to England, Belgium, Hungary, and Ireland. He was the highest-ranking official in the U.S. government to go to Ireland after President Kennedy did. This was before [President] Ronald Reagan went. We planned the trip. The Irish part of the trip was Dublin and he was going to go up to Northern Ireland and meet with all of the leaders in Northern Ireland—the Protestant leaders,

the Catholic leaders, the independent leaders, all of them. We went to England, and at the time, England was undergoing an election. Margaret Thatcher was running against James Callaghan. James Callaghan was the Prime Minister, and Margaret Thatcher was running. So they were in the midst of their six-week election period. It was a fascinating time to be there.

I had to have top security clearance by the CIA. We worked with Scotland Yard, we worked with the Irish intelligence, and when we went to Belgium, we had a briefing at NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization]. We had to have clearance for that, because, keep in mind, in 1979, the Soviet Union was in existence and we were still in the Cold War. We worked on planning the trip. Now, I, as a female staff person, could not go to Northern Ireland. There was great concern about safety. [O'Neill] wouldn't let any women go. No other female Member of the Congress was on that trip. They were all male Members, but their spouses went on the trip. But no spouses were allowed to go to Northern Ireland [except the Speaker's spouse]. Some of the male Members went with the Speaker, and Kirk went up there, Kirk O'Donnell, the staff person, and met with some of the Northern Irish leaders at the time.

And that's where he met John Hume for the first time. Again, this shows Speaker O'Neill's uncanny ability to judge character and to judge personalities. When he went to Egypt, before the Camp David Accords, he had met Anwar Sadat, and he said, "If we're ever going to bring about peace in the Middle East, Anwar Sadat is the one that's going to be able to do it." When he went to Northern Ireland and met John Hume, he said, "If we're ever going to have peace in Northern Ireland, and peace between Northern Ireland and the Republic, and stop this fighting and killing, it's going to be

John Hume.” And as we know, John Hume was very instrumental in the Good Friday Agreement.

George [John] Mitchell—who negotiated for the United States—was the Senate Majority Leader. President [William Jefferson “Bill”] Clinton sent him over there to negotiate the Good Friday Agreement for Northern Ireland. Mitchell gives credit to Speaker O’Neill for starting that peace process. The fact that such a high-ranking official of the United States took the time and the energy to go over there and to listen to all of the parties in Northern Ireland who didn’t want to come together, all of the parties in the Republic, and of course, England set the stage for a future peace. O’Neill went there for three reasons. One, to find out who the players were. Secondly, to see if there really was an interest in trying to stop the violence. Did they really want peace? They really did, but they didn’t know how to work together and do it. They weren’t ready to do it. And thirdly, he wanted to make it clear that he was not there to impose any plan or support any plan. America wasn’t going to impose anything. It had to be done by the Irish and the English. They had to do it themselves. He wanted to express our great concern that we wanted to move in that direction and would do everything we could as a nation to help facilitate that.

That set the stage for the peace process that ended in the Good Friday Agreement 15 years later. It took 15 years.¹

MURPHY: Yes. I think that his role in international affairs was a novel move for the Speaker.

MELCONIAN: It was novel.

MURPHY: But this is a moment of change in the House. We talked about all the many ways that it’s changing. There were also some women Members who were

gaining a more significant profile in the House. There was the formation of the Women's Caucus. What did you learn from some of the Members that were in office in the late '70s, like Barbara [Ann] Mikulski and others, that maybe gave you some insight on your own burgeoning political career at that time?

MELCONIAN:

Well, you mention Barbara Mikulski. We really liked Barbara. Speaker O'Neill and she got along beautifully. She was a hot ticket. She went to the Senate and organized all the women Members of the Senate in the caucus. What she did in the Senate, I used in the state senate when I was a state senator, modeling it after her. She was sharp. She was tough. She could fight with the boys. The boys respected her.

I think the newer Members—we had 76 new Democrats in the so-called “Watergate babies” [in 1974] and then we got 44 more [in 1976]. So throughout the mid-'70s, late '70s, we had a growing majority of younger Members, people who had not run for office before, had not come up through the political system of serving in the state legislature then running for Congress. There were not a lot of newer women. It only went from 13 to 21 [women in Congress] in that period [between 1971 and 1981]. But I think the male Members who were elected, newer male Members, were much more respectful, much more tolerant, much more accepting of women. They felt they were all in it together, because they wanted to be change agents. All of that was, I think, a positive change.

My female mentor in terms of Members of Congress, was Ella [Tambussi] Grasso. That was more the early '70s. Ella came from Windsor Locks, Connecticut—15 miles from where I lived. She was a Mount Holyoke graduate. Back to that Mount Holyoke connection, I can't bring that up enough, because that's what helped to propel me into a life of politics. Ella

Grasso was sharp, dynamic. She'd enter a room, and I mean it just would glow, like a ray of sunshine.

As a woman—a distinct minority—she was very frustrated by the House as an institution. She said, “It would take me forever. I’ll be dead and buried before I get into a position of power.” This was before we broke the automatic seniority system for the committee chairs. She repeatedly said, “It would take me forever. I’d be dead and buried before I’d get to be a subcommittee chairman.” She was very frustrated with the tediousness, the slowness, in terms of the ability of women to seek opportunity and rise to the top. So she decided that she didn’t want to be a Congresswoman. She wanted to run for governor. She ran and became the first woman in the country elected governor—the governor of Connecticut—in her own right—not succeeding her husband. She was a model.

She encouraged me to go to law school. She encouraged me to run for public office. And she said, “If you’re going to run, you’ve got to get a law degree, because that’s how you will be treated. In terms of the law degree—it’s a professional degree. It will give you more equal status in the perception of men.” She did not have a law degree. She had a master’s degree. But she encouraged me to do that and I did it. I ran for the state senate and I was fortunate enough to get elected.

It’s interesting because her daughter—this is years later and Ella had passed away—came to Springfield and did a TV ad that said, “If my mother were alive today, she’d be endorsing Linda for the state senate because”—and made these comments. {laughter} They had an editorial in my paper that said, “An endorsement from the grave.” The media mocked the endorsement. But Ella Grasso was known in our area, because she had lived just over the state line. A lot of the TV coverage was in both states because I came from

western Mass not the Boston area. That certainly was helpful in my campaign.

MURPHY: How did Tip O’Neill help you in your campaign for office, when you ran for Massachusetts state senate?

MELCONIAN: He was so proud that I wanted to run. I asked if he’d come up [to Springfield] and campaign for me and he came up 10 days before the election. What I thought it would do was turn the tide with the media and everything. I was considered an underdog by most political pundits in Springfield. First of all, I was a female. A woman had never run for the senate in western or central Mass. I was the first woman to get elected west of the greater Boston and central Mass area. The media favored others. I didn’t have an Irish or an Italian surname, which was important in terms of the constituency. The media didn’t think I could get elected. My parents and my family were not involved in politics and I had been away. I had been working in Washington. Even though I kept my residency there and was home a lot, I still had been away. I had not run for any other office previously. I hadn’t gone up through the ranks. So I didn’t do any of the traditional things that one does. I didn’t belong to the League of Women Voters—which is nonpartisan—which was one way in which women sowed their oats, so to speak, in learning about public service and politics, and then would run for office on basic issues.

So Tip O’Neill agreed to come up [to Springfield]. We had 500 constituents at Chez Josef [in Agawam, Massachusetts]. He went around and greeted everyone and thanked them for being there and supporting me. What happened was not what I expected—that the media would turn—“Oh Tip O’Neill came up.” No, what happened was, all of the people that supported me were so honored that Speaker Tip O’Neill had confidence and faith in

their little girl {laughter} from Springfield and he wanted her to be a state senator. They said, “We’re going to win this election for Tip.” That changed all of my campaigning. They weren’t out there campaigning for me anymore. They were out there campaigning for Tip O’Neill. “We’re going to show Tip O’Neill that we can deliver for him. We’re going to deliver. He’s asked us to support Linda.” This was his philosophy—everybody likes to be asked. “He’s asked us, and we’re going to do it, and we’re going to do it for Tip.” So they went the extra mile. I mean, they worked harder and harder, as hard as they could. {laughter} I mean, 24/7. And I was elected. I won by only 200 votes. We had a recount and there was a 46-vote error, so I won by 246 votes. After that, I had only one opposition in 12 runs because I worked hard.

But what I found fascinating, too, was election night—now, it was a close election and I had not won yet. I was behind. Of course, it was a national election year. As you know, Members of the House run every two years, and Tip O’Neill was in the Speaker’s Office waiting for returns from California, Hawaii, Alaska. It was 2:00, 3:00 in the morning. They [he and Leo] were calling every hour. “Any news?” I said, “We’re still waiting for Longmeadow. Longmeadow hasn’t come in.” We had paper ballots then. Remember the “hanging chad”—whatever it was called—in Florida in the 2000 [presidential] election? We had those in our election. I got rid of them. It was one of the first things I did as senator. We got rid of them in Massachusetts.

But in any case, by 3:30 a.m., I had won. So I called and I talked to the Speaker. He was still there waiting for the returns. I said, “Well, I won by 200 votes. They’re going to probably have to have a recount, but I won. What advice will you give me, Mr. Speaker?” He said, “Linda, the most important thing is to be liked by your colleagues when you serve in the senate.” Be liked. Politics of personality. Be liked, be responsive, work with

them, engage them. Don't be {laughter} nasty, don't be mean spirited, don't burn bridges. Build coalitions, because it's all about coalitions. It's all about relationships and developing relationships. That's what he was basically saying. Develop those relationships with your colleagues to get the results you want.

MURPHY: That seems like that sums him up in a way, right? And unfortunately, I think we're going to be out of time in a minute. What might have surprised you about your time here on Capitol Hill as a staff member for almost 10 years?

MELCONIAN: As a staff person, there were so many young people in great positions of influence and power and that they were so committed and they had such great, fresh ideas. We learned so much from each other. We bounced ideas back and forth. We respected each other's ideas, even if they were very different. And we tried to get to yes. I think the most important thing—looking back and the way we are, what's happened to our country now—the fact that there was an effort to try to get to yes. How do we work things out? How do we negotiate? How do we compromise? How do we ask people? How do we build relationships?

Members stayed here during the week. They didn't go home. Their kids went to the same schools. They socialized together. Their spouses came down and lived here. That's different today. But that's how they got to know each other and work with each other. They went out together. If you develop a relationship with someone it's hard to bash that person and to attack that person.

Those were the days, too, when in the Senate, Senator [Edward Moore "Ted"] Kennedy and Senator [Orrin Grant] Hatch—diametrically opposed in ideology—could come together. It was when a Tip O'Neill and a Jerry

Ford, a Tip O'Neill and a John [Jacob] Rhodes—who were Minority Leaders—could come together and work a compromise that was in the best interest of the public. So I think the commitment, the energy, the enthusiasm, the willingness to work out solutions, and to sit there and work and negotiate until you could get to yes, was really a phenomenal experience. That's what I think democratized the House. That's what I think made it a place where you were proud to serve as a Member, and you were certainly proud to work as a staff person.

MURPHY: Thanks a lot for coming to speak with us today, Linda. We really appreciate it.

MELCONIAN: Well, thank you. And as I said, it's a real honor and a privilege to be a part of the project. Thank you for inviting me and including me in the project, Michael.

MURPHY: Thank you.

NOTES

¹ The Good Friday Agreement was signed on April 10, 1998.